

Ranch Polls Should Always Open By Asking How Rancher Feels

By Monte Noelke

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MERTZON — During the fateful closing days of 1965 a graduate animal husbandry student for Sul Ross College chose to run a survey to determine if the ranchers in our county favored a one-year training program for cowboys.

The timing for the poll couldn't have been worse. There were still quite a number of us short grass ranchers who were uncertain whether inhalation of fumes off yule logs, the blindness that comes from nutmeg dust, and the anemia resulting from existing solely on cream cheese and salted nuts was going to change our names from the tax roles to the coroner's report.

Evidently the clear eyed apprentice scholar had no patience with such goings-on. And he wasn't aware that at the time other topics would have made more suitable conversation. Low-cost burial insurance, for example, or medicare for over-enthusiastic holidayers, or the pros and cons of dying under a shade tree by a mountain stream without the blessings of either medicare or burial insurance.

But regardless of the precarious condition of the pollees, the pollster was raring to go, and eventually he ended at my outfit. His questionnaire proved to be nothing more than four carefully worded sections designed to ascertain whether it would be feasible to launch a school to train city lads to be cowboys.

We sped through the portion pertaining to the employment practices of the ranch; in short order we worked out the salaries and benefits of the workers. However the next step was a different matter. This one required that the rancher examine a list of common cowboy skills and indicate which were most important.

The intention here was to weigh a series of talents, ranging from windmilling to horsemanship, and enumerate them in order of importance. Then, when and if a cowboy school was set up, the professors would know whether to stress, say, shearing over horseshoeing or vaccinating over fence building.

My first inclination upon being confronted with this list, considering that my body temperature at the moment was alternating between a high of 106 and a low of 85 degrees, was to plead with this chap to forget the cowboy school and go to work on inducing an honor student from a medical school to move out here. But sensing that this nimble witted youngster was determined to get an answer, I attacked the question.

I'm not sure, but I think I placed windmilling at the top; horseshoeing and horsemanship as a tie; and fence building over pipelining. Roping was put at the tail end, since all the loops that are thrown outside of a roping arena in this modern age are those that kids throw at the chickens and milk stock.

The remainder of the form presented no difficulty. We whipped through the yes-or-no portions of whether we would hire one of the trainees (he wouldn't accept "I guess so," and I put down "Yes"). Under the question designed to show my degree of interest in the program, I put "mildly interested."

As soon as we'd finished the questionnaire, the pollster left as if he thought my malady might be contagious. When he'd gone I regretted that I hadn't asked more about his proposed school.

For example, it would have been interesting to know if this school was going to be similar to the old time universities where the students forgot, each fall, what they'd learned the preceding semester, and by the following spring couldn't remember anything they'd learned during the fall term except the name of the bank where the family kept their checking account, and the shortest route to the cheapest beer garden in town.

Or would this center of cowboy learning resemble one of our serious modern institutions where, it seems, the kids spend half their time burning up the soles of their tennis shoes marching, and the other half wearing out the seat of their jeans sitting on the front steps of public building which harbor officials with whom they are currently displeased? But I had missed my chance.

I finally dismissed the project from my mind with the conclusion that if all my fellow drovers and stockmen were as stricken as I from fruit cake bloat, cranberry sauce spasm, and the deadly punchbowl virus, they didn't care if Sul Ross College sponsored a seminar in the art of training ringmasters for flea circuses — much less concerned with teaching kids how to get in and out of a gate at the proper time.

However, these thoughts came too late to tell the bright-eyed youngster. Probably at this very moment he is bragging how he polled the short grass country just before the Christmas orgy wiped a scattering of us old toads off the earth.